

# American and European Writers in Polynesia, 1850-1950: An Exploration of Colonial Encounters and Literary Responses

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, a wave of American and European writers traveled to the islands of Polynesia, seeking adventure, inspiration, and a glimpse of a world untouched by Western civilization. These writers included Herman Melville, Robert Louis Stevenson, Jack London, James Michener, and Margaret Mead, among others. Their encounters with Polynesian cultures had a profound impact on their worldviews and literary imaginations, shaping their literary styles and contributing to the development of Western narratives about the Pacific region.



## Sojourners in Paradise: American and European Writers in Polynesia 1850-1950 by George Rathmell

★★★★★ 5 out of 5

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**Colonial Encounters and Literary Responses**

The arrival of American and European writers in Polynesia coincided with the era of European colonialism, which had a significant impact on the lives of the Polynesian people. The writers' experiences in Polynesia were shaped by the colonial context, and their literary works often reflected their observations and interpretations of the effects of colonialism.

Herman Melville, who visited Polynesia in the 1840s, was one of the first American writers to write about the region. In his novel *Typee* (1846), Melville portrays Polynesian society as a paradise lost, untouched by the corrupting influences of Western civilization. However, Melville's later works, such as *Moby-Dick* (1851), reveal a more complex and ambivalent view of Polynesia, as he witnessed the devastating effects of colonialism and the whaling industry on the Polynesian people.

Robert Louis Stevenson, who traveled to Polynesia in the 1880s, was another important figure in the development of Western literature about the region. In his novel *The Ebb-Tide* (1894), Stevenson explores the tensions between Western and Polynesian cultures, and the ways in which colonialism disrupted traditional Polynesian ways of life.

Jack London, who visited Polynesia in the early 20th century, was drawn to the region's natural beauty and its potential for adventure. In his novel *The Call of the Wild* (1903), London uses the setting of the Yukon Territory to explore the themes of primitivism and the struggle between civilization and nature. However, London's work was also influenced by his experiences in Polynesia, and his short story "The Heathen" (1904) reflects his observations of the impact of colonialism on the Polynesian people.

## **The Influence of Anthropology and Ethnography**

In addition to the literary works of American and European writers, the period 1850-1950 also saw the rise of anthropology and ethnography as academic disciplines. Anthropologists and ethnographers traveled to Polynesia to study the cultures of the indigenous people, and their work had a significant influence on the ways in which Western writers represented Polynesian society.

Margaret Mead, who conducted fieldwork in Samoa in the 1920s and 1930s, was one of the most influential anthropologists of the 20th century. Her work on Samoan culture, such as her book *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), challenged Western stereotypes about Polynesian society and contributed to a more nuanced understanding of cultural diversity.

The work of anthropologists and ethnographers provided American and European writers with a wealth of information about Polynesian cultures, and this information influenced the ways in which they represented Polynesian society in their literary works. For example, James Michener's novel *Hawaii* (1959) draws heavily on anthropological research to create a detailed and historically accurate portrait of Hawaiian society.

### **Cultural Exchange and Literary Legacies**

The encounters between American and European writers and Polynesian cultures were not simply one-sided affairs. Polynesian writers and intellectuals also played an important role in shaping the literary landscape of the Pacific region. In the early 20th century, a number of Polynesian writers emerged, such as Albert Wendt and Witi Ihimaera, who wrote about their experiences of colonialism and cultural change. These writers drew on both Western and Polynesian literary traditions to create new and distinctive forms of literature.

The literary works of American and European writers in Polynesia have had a lasting impact on the ways in which we think about the Pacific region. These works have helped to shape our understanding of Polynesian cultures, and they have also contributed to the development of a global literary tradition.

The period 1850-1950 was a time of significant cultural exchange between American and European writers and the peoples of Polynesia. The writers' encounters with Polynesian cultures had a profound impact on their worldviews and literary imaginations, and their literary works continue to provide valuable insights into the complex and dynamic relationship between the West and the Pacific region.



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